Karna in the Mahabharata: Loyalty, Friendship, and Empathy

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The End of Exile and the Prelude to War

During the third round of their exile, the Pandavas had to remain hidden for one year following twelve years in the forest. The condition was that if they were discovered during this hidden year, they would have to undergo another twelve years of exile.

When Arjuna revealed himself, Duryodhana thought he had caught the Pandavas prematurely and demanded another twelve years of exile. Laughing, Arjuna informed him that the one-year hidden period had ended the previous day. He pointed to their teacher, who confirmed Arjuna's statement, infuriating Duryodhana.

This confrontation led to the outbreak of war. In the ensuing battle, Duryodhana's forces were defeated. For the second time, Karna, despite his bravery, had to flee the battlefield. This moment underscored the inevitable conflict and further solidified the enmity between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, setting the stage for the great war of Kurukshetra.

Karna's Supreme Generosity

When Bhima questioned Krishna about the uniqueness of Karna's generosity, noting that the Pandavas also gave alms generously, Krishna decided to illustrate the difference. He created a mountain of silver and asked the Pandavas to give the people. The Pandavas

broke off pieces and gave them to everyone, but despite their efforts, the mountain remained largely intact, and the people continued to gather.

Krishna then called Karna and asked him to give away the same mountain as alms. Instead of breaking it apart, Karna simply told the beggar to take the entire mountain. This act left the Pandavas astonished.

Krishna explained that true generosity means giving in such a way that the recipient does not have to ask again. By giving away the whole mountain, Karna ensured that the beggar's needs were fully met, demonstrating that his alms were indeed unparalleled. This incident highlighted Karna's supreme generosity and set him apart as a truly noble soul.

Karna's Encounter with Krishna

When Krishna asked Karna to join his side, Karna responded with a mix of admiration and steadfastness. He laughed and addressed Krishna, acknowledging Krishna's divine capabilities and cleverness. Karna recounted how Krishna had vanquished two demons through his cunning, saved cows and goats by lifting a mountain, and enchanted people with the music of his flute.

Karna saw through Krishna's attempt to persuade him with his divine magic and stated that if he switched sides, not only would Krishna mock him, but even Draupadi and her allies would ridicule him for abandoning his loyalty to Duryodhana. This response left Krishna momentarily speechless, struck by Karna's unwavering loyalty and perceptive insight.

The Heart-Wrenching Reunion of Karna and Kunti

Despite Krishna's attempts to persuade Karna, he eventually realized that only Karna's mother, Kunti, might be able to sway him. In a deeply emotional encounter, Karna met Kunti, unaware initially of her true identity. He greeted her respectfully, acknowledging her as the queen mother and the mother of the Pandavas.

Kunti revealed that she was his mother, to which Karna initially reacted with skepticism, recalling how many women had claimed to be his mother. To prove her claim, he retrieved the veil that had covered him when he was abandoned in the river. He gave it to Kunti and asked her to wear it, explaining that anyone other than his true mother would suffer from severe itching and burning upon wearing it. Kunti wore the veil without any adverse effects, confirming her identity as his mother.

Overwhelmed with emotion, Karna asked Kunti why she had abandoned him. Kunti explained the circumstances, detailing her fears and the social stigma she faced at the time. Both mother and son were moved to tears, sharing a moment of profound sorrow and reconciliation. Karna, despite his pain, asked Kunti what she wanted from him. Kunti implored him to join the Pandavas, revealing that they were his brothers. She urged him to come with her, hoping to unite her family and prevent the impending war.

Karna's Loyalty to Duryodhana

Karna explained to Kunti why he could not betray Duryodhana, even for his newly discovered brothers, the Pandavas. He recalled how everyone else—mother, father, and teacher—had abandoned him. When Dronacharya questioned his class and caste, it was Duryodhana who stood by him, giving him an identity and a kingdom.

Karna recounted an incident involving Duryodhana and his wife, Bhanumathi. Karna and Bhanumathi were playing a game when she suddenly stood up upon hearing Duryodhana approaching, causing her pearl necklace to break and scatter by karna. Instead of getting angry or suspicious, Duryodhana calmly asked shall pick up the pearls and reassure Karna? He expressed his unwavering trust in Karna, his wife, and their friendship, demonstrating the depth of his care and love for Karna.

Karna emphasized to Kunti that while everyone else had abandoned him, Duryodhana had given him love, friendship, and a sense of belonging. He questioned how he could ever leave Duryodhana, who had done so much for him. Kunti, moved and speechless, could only ask for Karna's two wishes.

Karna's Conditions and Wishes

In Mahabharata, two conditions were set for Karna from kunti: not to use the Nagasthra on Arjuna more than once and not to engage in combat with any of the Pandavas except Arjuna. Karna calmly accepted these terms. At the same time, Karna asked two wishes from Kunti, his mother. The first wish was that no one should know they are mother and son until the war ends. The second wish was that when he died in battle, she should take his body in her lap and publicly declare that he was her son.

Upon hearing Karna's wishes, Kunti was overcome with emotion and began to cry. After years of separation from her beloved son, the prospect of losing him in battle was deeply painful. Nevertheless, she gave her word to honor Karna's wishes.

Only three individuals were privy to this emotional meeting Krishna, Kunti, and Karna himself. Among them, Karna was the only one who knew that he would die in the war, yet he steadfastly stood by Duryodhana, displaying his unwavering loyalty despite this knowledge.

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